

Waterway. The forest features coastal / inland swamp habitat with recreational opportunities for hiking, boating, camping, swimming, wildlife viewing and more. The forest lies along the eastern side of the existing US 17 alignment for a large portion of the study area.

3.3.9.3 Gamelands and Preservation Areas

The North Carolina Natural Heritage Program (NHP) maintains a list of significant “natural heritage areas” throughout the state that identify sites which represent the best collections of natural diversity, with occurrences of rare plant and animal species, rare or high quality natural communities, and special animal habitats. Not all areas are protected, but inclusion in the list indicates a site deserves priority for protection. The following sites are listed in or near the project area:

The **Croatan National Forest** is classified as a nationally-significant megasite and runs along the eastern side of US 17 north and east of Maysville. Portions of the forest are designated as protected areas for various species, including the red-cockaded woodpecker and black bears.

The **Maysville Goldenrod Roadsides** is a population of spring-flowering goldenrod that grows along US 17 in roadside ditches. This colony is one of the largest and most productive colonies in North Carolina and has been identified by the NHP as nationally significant. Annual roadside mowing of this species (after flowering and fruiting) may contribute to its success by mimicking natural disturbance by periodic fires. Spring-flowering goldenrod has been documented along the western shoulder of US 17 south of Belgrade, also.

Mill Creek Outcrops is a privately-owned area located immediately east of the study area. The Mill Creek Outcrops natural area is characterized by the presence of marl outcrops and Carolina spleenwort and contains a rare natural plant community identified by the NHP as nationally significant.

The **Trent River Aquatic Habitat** is a public waterway crossing the study area north of Pollocksville.

Other natural heritage areas beyond the boundaries of the study area are Catfish Lake (9,700 acres located within the Croatan National Forest), Island Creek Natural Area (280 acres located east of the US 17 corridor along SR 1004), the Cherry Point Oak Grove Swamps (180 acres along the Trent River, immediately west of the study area), Deep Gully (70 acres immediately northeast of the corridor), and the White Oak Marshes (3,800 acres southeast of the corridor).

In addition, the Onslow Bight extends from Cape Fear to Cape Lookout and approximately 30 miles inland, containing a unique area of saltwater marshes, barrier islands, riverine wetlands,